

Lithuania Is Not Tiananmen Square

Has President Bush made a mistake in setting a date for a summit meeting with President Gorbachev? Will Mr. Gorbachev take this as a blanket endorsement and thus a blank check to crush the Lithuanian independence movement?

Mr. Bush can always change plans if events warrant. But his approach makes sense. He wants both Lithuanian independence and continued improvement in Soviet-American relations. This requires a diplomatic balancing act: strengthening ties with Moscow, while warning Soviet leaders that anything other than a peaceful settlement in Lithuania will hurt those ties. In effect, he has decided that simply beating Mr. Gorbachev over the head about Lithuania could be self-defeating.

Why do some politicians and pundits see this approach as a sellout? One reason is that they don't seem to understand the difference between Mr. Gorbachev and Leonid Brezhnev, the Soviet boss in the 1960's and 1970's. They also seem to confuse Moscow's actions in Lithuania with Deng Xiaoping's brutal crackdown in Tiananmen Square.

Mr. Brezhnev helped to sustain Stalinist dictatorship and practices. It was appropriate for Washington to distrust him and to use pressure as the main tactic in dealing with him.

Mr. Gorbachev is dismantling the Brezhnev system. He's been doing almost all that we've asked of him, and then some — like agreeing on Friday through Foreign Minister Shevardnadze that a unified Germany need not be neutral. To deal with Mr. Gorbachev as an enemy would undermine his ability to continue doing those things the West has wanted all along. Conversely, moving forward on matters of mutual interest like arms control and stronger economic ties can only strengthen Mr. Gorbachev against his adversaries at home.

Mr. Gorbachev may or may not be willing to go along with Lithuanian independence at some point. It is obvious that whatever his inner feelings, he has no choice but to oppose Lithuania's unilateral declaration of independence. No Soviet leader's power could survive the destruction of the Soviet empire at this time. But he is a far better bet to allow independence, in time, than any of the Russian nationalists, generals and secret police who probably would succeed him.

Nor does it make sense to argue that Mr. Bush is appeasing Mr. Gorbachev on Lithuania as he appeased Deng Xiaoping after the events in Tiananmen Square. Mr. Bush's handling of China has been naïve at best. He greatly underestimated both the hard-line trend of the Beijing Government, which is what brought the brave Chinese students into the square, and the tenacity of the hard-liners. His policy of trying to turn Beijing around with friendship made the U.S. seem insensitive to repression, and was bound to fail as well.

On Lithuania, Mr. Bush is fully aware of the dynamics — a drive for independence unleashed by Mr. Gorbachev himself. He sees a reasonable chance of finding common ground between Moscow and Vilnius. Thus, he has sound reasons for encouraging Mr. Gorbachev and giving him the benefit of the doubt.

In that context, it makes sense for Mr. Bush to meet with Mr. Gorbachev at the end of May in Washington. For the faster Mr. Bush proceeds toward new arms cuts and economic agreements, the deeper will be Moscow's stake in all that the West has to offer in military stability and trade. And the more value Moscow attaches to these benefits, the less likely Soviet leaders will be to put them at risk in Lithuania.